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**MATERNAL DEPRESSION LINKED WITH SOCIAL AND LANGUAGE
DEVELOPMENT, SCHOOL READINESS: MATERNAL SENSITIVITY HELPS
THESE CHILDREN FARE BETTER**

Children of depressed mothers performed more poorly on measures of school readiness, verbal comprehension, and expressive language at 36 months of age than children of mothers who never reported depression. In addition, children of depressed mothers were reported to be less cooperative and to have more problem behaviors at 36 months, according to a study published in the September issue of *Developmental Psychology*. However, maternal sensitivity also played an important role in the well-being of children. Even when mothers were depressed, if they were also sensitive, their children fared better.

"This study examines the role of maternal depression in children's development," said Duane Alexander, M.D., Director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). "It demonstrates that depression does not just affect the mother, that it is also linked with the well-being of her child."

The investigation was conducted by researchers affiliated with the NICHD Study of Early Child Care. That study, initiated by the NICHD and carried out by investigators at the NICHD and 14 universities around the country, has enrolled and large and socially diverse group of children and their families from 10 locations throughout the United States. This study examined 1,215 mothers and children to observe the link between maternal depression and maternal sensitivity and how these relate to the development of the child during the first three years of life.

The study followed the families from 1 month to 36 months after the birth of their child. Researchers rated the sensitivity of the mothers by observing them at play with their children at 6, 15, 24 and 36 months of age. Mothers who were respectful of their children, who were supportive of their children's activities and did not interfere unnecessarily, and who responded appropriately to their children's emotions were rated as sensitive. In addition, at 36 months, the children were tested for cognitive and language development and observed following requests to clean up toys. Mothers also reported on their children's social behavior.

The mothers were assessed for depression using the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale. Out of the 1,215 women, 55% were defined as "never depressed" during the child's first three years of life, 38% were "sometimes depressed," and the remaining 8% were considered "chronically depressed."

The following are some key findings from the study:

- Children of mothers who had more prolonged depression were seen as less cooperative, and their mothers reported the children had more problem behaviors than children whose mothers were never depressed. These children also scored lower on tests of school readiness, expressive language, and verbal comprehension;

children of mothers who were depressed some of the time fell in between these two groups.

- Children whose mothers were more sensitive did better on cognitive and language tests, were more helpful in the clean-up task, and their mothers reported them to be more cooperative and to have fewer problem behaviors, regardless of their mothers' level of depression.
- Lower levels of maternal sensitivity in depressed mothers partly explained their children's poorer school readiness, verbal comprehension, and expressive language and higher rates of problem behavior. This suggests that depression can lead to less sensitive maternal behavior which, in turn, leads to poorer child development.

The NICHD is one of the Institutes comprising the National Institutes of Health, the federal government's premier biomedical research agency. NICHD supports and conducts research on the reproductive, neurobiological, developmental, and behavioral processes that determine and maintain the health of children, adults, families, and populations. The NICHD website, www.nichd.nih.gov contains additional information about the Institute and its mission. For more information on NICHD child care research, see the NICHD Study of Early Child Care at http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/early_child_care.htm.

This study is directed by a Steering Committee and supported by NICHD staff. The participating investigators in this study are listed in alphabetical order, along with their contact information.

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